



## Research Paper

Cocatalyst free Z-schematic enhanced H<sub>2</sub> evolution over LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> composite photocatalyst using Ag as an electron mediator

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## ABSTRACT

A novel cocatalyst free Z-schematic photocatalytic system of Ag/LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> was successfully fabricated for clean hydrogen fuel evolution. The spherical nanoparticles of LaVO<sub>4</sub> were prepared in solution combustion method for the first time using glycine as a fuel, BiVO<sub>4</sub> was deposited onto LaVO<sub>4</sub> through a deposition-precipitation method and Ag was loaded on the surface of LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> composite by photoreduction method. The composites were characterized by XRD, UV-vis DRS, SEM, TEM, EDS and XPS to ensure the successful integration of Ag or (and) BiVO<sub>4</sub> with LaVO<sub>4</sub>. A series of photocatalytic H<sub>2</sub> evolution experiments, employing Na<sub>2</sub>S and Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>3</sub> as hole scavengers, showed that the Ag/LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> composite exhibited a superior photocatalytic performance compared to single LaVO<sub>4</sub> or BiVO<sub>4</sub>. Although BiVO<sub>4</sub> cannot be used for H<sub>2</sub> evolution, it can significantly enhance the H<sub>2</sub> evolution performance of LaVO<sub>4</sub> through a Z-scheme mechanism with Ag as an electron mediator. Moreover, investigations on photoluminescence and fluorescence lifetime measurements demonstrated the greater separation efficacy of photoinduced excitons in the Z-scheme Ag/LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> photocatalytic system. This newly constructed LaVO<sub>4</sub> based Z-scheme system exhibits promising photocatalytic H<sub>2</sub> evolution activity with significant longevity and will be useful for potential applications in energy driven technologies.

## 1. Introduction

Hydrogen has been heralded as a clean and sustainable fuel with zero carbon emission and high energy yield (141.9 MJ/kg) than conventional fuels [1]. Solar light driven photocatalytic water splitting to produce hydrogen has become a promising solution to the tapering resources of fossil fuels and detrimental effects of greenhouse gases produced due to their combustion. Strenuous attempts have been carried out to enhance the visible light absorption of the conventional photocatalysts such as TiO<sub>2</sub>, ZnO etc. which are just active under UV-light irradiation [2–4]. However, it is obvious that mere visible light absorption will not guarantee higher photocatalytic efficacy. Typically, the performance of photocatalysts is significantly favored by three conditions: (i) a narrow band gap that can facilitate the efficient utilization of sunlight (ii) a more negative conduction band (CB) potential and a more positive valence band (VB) potential for the reduction and oxidation reactions, respectively (iii) reducing the rate of recombination of photogenerated charge carriers [5]. However, condition (ii) will widen the band gap of a photocatalyst, resulting poor sunlight

absorption i.e., incongruity of condition (i). Therefore, it is difficult for a single semiconductor photocatalyst to simultaneously possess broad solar light-absorption, enhanced separation of charge carriers and strong redox ability.

In addition, most semiconductors cannot produce H<sub>2</sub> without a cocatalyst (often Pt), even by using sacrificial electron donor [6]. The indispensable need of expensive noble metal cocatalyst, to localize the protons for the formation of hydrogen gas, is another factor that makes the photocatalytic water splitting a rather unfeasible proposition [7]. In this context, there is an urgent quest for designing cocatalyst free composite photocatalytic systems, without compromising with the efficiency, by prudently choosing the relative band positions of the two photocatalysts for efficient utilization of solar energy and limiting the rate of recombination of photogenerated charge carriers.

Besides tuning the photocatalyst itself, the coupling of two semiconductors in staggered alignment of band structures provides more separation of photogenerated excitons. As a result of irradiation, the two conjoint semiconductors in a heterojunction composite photocatalyst are activated simultaneously. The photogenerated electrons are

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transferred from a higher conduction band to a lower conduction band, whereas the holes transport to a higher valence band from a lower valence band. Thus designing heterojunction photocatalysts has emerged as the inevitable route to achieve efficient charge separation [8]. However, increment in the separation of charge carriers occurs while dampening the redox ability, due to the photogenerated electrons and holes are accumulated on the band with lower redox potentials [9]. It is difficult to achieve strong redox ability and higher electron-hole separation simultaneously by the heterojunction composite photocatalysts.

Z-scheme water splitting mimicking photosynthesis of green plants was first introduced by Bard in 1979 [10]. Since then many efforts have been made to construct Z-scheme photocatalytic systems without redox mediators (i.e., liquid ionic pairs such as  $\text{IO}_3^-/\text{I}^-$ ,  $\text{Fe}^{3+}/\text{Fe}^{2+}$  and  $\text{Co}(\text{bpy})_3^{3+}/\text{Fe}^{2+}$ ) causing backward reactions [11,12]. In 2006, an all solid state Z-scheme system of  $\text{CdS-Au-TiO}_2$  was reported for the first time, using Au as an electron mediator between two photocatalysts [13]. As no redox couples were used, the stability and the charge transfer was simultaneously improved. In direct Z-scheme system of two narrow band gap photocatalysts, photogenerated electrons of one semiconductor with a lower conduction band and holes of other semiconductor with a higher valence band are recombined. Therefore, Z-scheme photocatalyst (with or without electron mediator) not only boosts the separation efficiency of photogenerated electron-hole pairs, but also preserves excellent redox ability.

More recently, significant attention has been paid to the monoclinic lanthanum vanadate ( $\text{m-LaVO}_4$ ) owing to its notable properties such as light absorption in the visible region and surface catalytic ability [14,15]. However, its utilization in the photocatalytic hydrogen generation has not been reported so far.  $\text{LaVO}_4$ -based photocatalysts suffer from certain limitations such as lower surface area and the quick recombination of photogenerated excitons. Based on the above considerations,  $\text{BiVO}_4$  has been chosen to couple with  $\text{LaVO}_4$  to remedy the defect of faster recombination of charge carriers thereby improving the photocatalytic efficiency.  $\text{BiVO}_4$  has several merits such as visible light absorption, chemical stability, low cost and non-toxic properties [16].  $\text{BiVO}_4$  alone is unable to produce hydrogen through water splitting because its conduction band is located at a more positive potential than the potential of water reduction [0 eV Vs NHE;  $\text{H}^+/\text{H}_2$ ]. However, considering the composite of  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$ , it is expected to enhance the rate of  $\text{H}_2$  evolution through the Z-scheme mechanism. Furthermore, previous reports suggest that  $\text{LaVO}_4$  has suitable band edges ( $E_{\text{CB}} = -0.06$  eV,  $E_{\text{VB}} = 2.01$  eV), that match well with  $\text{BiVO}_4$  band edge positions ( $E_{\text{CB}} = 0.46$  eV,  $E_{\text{VB}} = 2.86$  eV) to probably form a direct Z-scheme photocatalytic system [17,18].

The poor interfacial charge transfer efficiency has a negative influence on the electron-hole separation ability. In particular,  $\text{BiVO}_4$  is known for poor electron conductivity [19]. Therefore, an effective conductive charge mediator is essential at the interface of  $\text{LaVO}_4\text{-BiVO}_4$  for attaining high efficiency. For instance, Ag has been used as such electron mediator in many Z-scheme systems because of its excellent electron conductivity [20–22]. Ag has been chosen as an electron mediator as it is cheaper than other electron mediators such as Au, Ru, Pd, Ir and Pt. Further, the Fermi level of metallic Ag is more negative than the valence band of  $\text{LaVO}_4$ , more positive than conduction band of  $\text{BiVO}_4$ . Thus, Ag makes a good charge transfer bridge between  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$ . Therefore, in the current work,  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  was combined with and without Ag to construct a novel solid-state Z-scheme photocatalytic system for  $\text{H}_2$  evolution from water using  $\text{Na}_2\text{S}$  and  $\text{Na}_2\text{SO}_3$  solution as a sacrificial agent. Moreover, the present Z-scheme photocatalytic system avoids the inherent requirement of the expensive noble metal cocatalyst to generate hydrogen. The essence of the thermodynamic relationship between  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  is explained and the mechanism of effective charge separation based on the Z-scheme fashion is also studied in detail.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Synthesis

Monoclinic  $\text{LaVO}_4$  was prepared by solution combustion method for the first time using glycine as a fuel. Solution combustion is a one step self-propagating synthesis method. In this method, reactant mixture is ignited to a temperature that is considerably lower than the actual phase formation temperature in a short time and it is considered as one of the energy efficient preparative methods [23–25]. The precursor solution was made by dissolving stoichiometric amounts of  $\text{La}(\text{NO}_3)_3 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (1.705 g) and  $\text{NH}_4\text{VO}_3$  (0.46 g) in 15 mL of water and 5 mL of 3 M nitric acid, respectively. Both were mixed in a combustion petri dish and stirred with magnetic stirrer. Stoichiometric amount of glycine (0.55 g) was dissolved in 10 mL of water and added to the above mixture. This solution mixture was placed into a muffle furnace held at 400 °C for 20 min. The obtained product was heated in furnace at 500 °C for 2 h to obtain pure lanthanum vanadate powders. The product yield is approximately 1 g.

The  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  composite photocatalysts were prepared by a facile deposition-precipitation method [26]. Typically, 0.2 g of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  was dispersed in 30 mL of deionized water using ultrasonication. Subsequently,  $\text{Bi}(\text{NO}_3)_3$  and  $\text{NH}_4\text{VO}_3$  were precisely weighed with the molar ratio of 1:1 and were individually dissolved in a 3 M nitric acid solution. Then, the two solutions were mixed well and the pH was adjusted to 9 by slowly adding NaOH solution. An orange yellow precipitate was obtained and then it was blended with the  $\text{LaVO}_4$  suspension under vigorous stirring for 12 h. The final product was obtained by filtering the precipitate followed by sintering at 500 °C for 5 h. The composites with different weight ratios of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  to  $\text{BiVO}_4$  were  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  (10 wt%),  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  (20 wt%),  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  (30 wt%) and  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  (50 wt%), which are labeled as LV/BV10, LV/BV20, LV/BV30 and LV/BV50, respectively. The bare monoclinic  $\text{BiVO}_4$  sample was also synthesized under the same conditions without adding  $\text{LaVO}_4$ .

In addition, Ag deposited  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  composite was prepared by photodeposition method. The previously prepared LV/BV20 was added into 50 mL of 10 vol% methanol solution. After that, calculated amount of  $\text{AgNO}_3$  was added, and the suspension was irradiated with a 400 W metal halide lamp for 60 min. The product was washed with ethanol and water for three times, and dried at 60 °C. Ag/ $\text{LaVO}_4$  was also prepared by the same procedure by depositing 10 wt% of Ag on  $\text{LaVO}_4$ .

### 2.2. Characterizations

X-ray diffraction patterns were recorded on a Bruker D8 diffractometer using  $\text{Cu-K}\alpha$  radiation at a scan rate of 2°/min in the 20°–80° scan range. Diffuse reflectance spectral studies were performed using solid state UV-vis spectrophotometer (PerkinElmer, Lambda 35). ULTRA55 FESEM, Carl Zeiss was used to obtain SEM images. Prior to taking images, the samples drop-casted on silicon wafers, they were dispersed in absolute ethanol and ultrasonicated for 5 min. The drop-casted samples were gold sputtered using Quorum sputtering before imaging in order to restrict charging of the sample. TEM images were captured using FEI Tecnai T-20 operated at 180 kV. TEM samples were dispersed in absolute ethanol and drop-casted onto copper grids. X-ray photoelectron spectra were obtained using ESCA+, (omicron nanotechnology, Oxford Instrument Germany). Powder samples were deposited on Cu tape and degassed for overnight in XPS FEL chamber to avoid the air contamination on sample surface. A charge neutralizer of 2 keV is applied to overcome the charging problem and binding energy of C1 s core at 284.6 eV was considered as reference. Photoluminescence spectra were obtained using a PerkinElmer LS 55 Luminescence spectrophotometer. Time-resolved fluorescence emission decay measurements of the samples were collected on a FLS980 Fluorescence Spectrometer (Edinburgh Instruments) and the excitation

wavelength was set to 340 nm. BET surface area measurements were performed using Nova-1000 Quantachrome after the catalysts were regenerated at 120 °C for 2 h. Electrochemical experiments were carried out using a CH Instruments potentiostat/galvanostat (model 608C) in 0.1 M Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> electrolyte at a frequency of 1 kHz in dark in a conventional three-electrode configuration with the catalyst drop casted on indium tin oxide (ITO)-coated glass as working electrode, a platinum wire as the counter electrode and a saturation calomel electrode (SCE) as the reference electrode.

### 2.3. Evaluation of photocatalytic H<sub>2</sub> generation

The photocatalytic H<sub>2</sub> evolution experiments were performed in a photoreactor, consisting a 400 W metal halide lamp that was placed inside a cylindrical quartz jacket and cooled using water circulation. The metal halide lamp was chosen intentionally because it adequately replicates both the pattern and intensity of peaks of the solar spectrum thus simulating the solar illumination with a very low UV-A content and a large part in the visible region [27,28]. In a typical experiment, 0.015 g of the catalyst powders was dispersed in a quartz vessel containing 150 mL of freshly prepared 0.5 M Na<sub>2</sub>S + 0.5 M Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>3</sub> solution. Prior to irradiation, the suspension was thoroughly degassed to remove air by bubbling Ar gas for 30 min. The hydrogen content was analyzed by gas chromatograph (Mayura Analytical, India) with high-purity Ar as a carrier gas using TCD detector.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Characterization studies

Lanthanum vanadate was prepared by a solution-combustion process using glycine as a fuel. Glycine is a complexing agent and inhibits the agglomeration of the metal ions as the water is evaporated. Glycine is oxidized by the nitrate ions (oxidizers) and it caters as a fuel for the combustion process. In this synthesis, dissolution of La(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>3</sub> in the aqueous medium results in La<sup>3+</sup> ions and NH<sub>4</sub>VO<sub>3</sub> in nitric acid produces VO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup> ions. Glycine becomes a zwitter ion with both positive amino group end and the negative carboxylic end in aqueous solution. After adding glycine solution, the mixture of La<sup>3+</sup> and VO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup> ions form the metal chelate complex by attaching to the bidentate ligand of the glycine molecules [29]. When the metal chelate complex is subjected to high temperature, auto combustion process initiates and it breaks down the complex to form fine crystallites with the evolution of N<sub>2</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>O and CO<sub>2</sub> gases. These gases quickly evolve to break large clusters, hindering particle growth and thereby increasing porosity of synthesized nano-materials. The resulting powders after auto-ignition were calcined at 500 °C for 2 h to obtain pure and well crystalline LaVO<sub>4</sub>.

The phase purity of the as prepared LaVO<sub>4</sub> and co-occurrence of both LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> phases in the composite photocatalysts were investigated using the powder XRD technique. It is observed that all the diffraction peaks of LaVO<sub>4</sub> (Fig. 1(a)) can be readily indexed to a perfect monoclinic structure (JCPDS No. 70-0216) and no other peaks corresponding to the ingredients are observed. It can also be seen that the LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> composites exhibit similar XRD patterns to pure LaVO<sub>4</sub>. No diffraction peaks of BiVO<sub>4</sub> are discerned for LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> (10 wt%) in Fig. 1(b), probably due to the small amount of BiVO<sub>4</sub>. When the weight of BiVO<sub>4</sub> is larger than 10% in the composite, the XRD patterns show a diffraction peak at 2θ = 28.6°, which is attributed to the monoclinic BiVO<sub>4</sub> phase (JCPDS No. 14-0688). The intensity of this peak increases with the amount of the BiVO<sub>4</sub> loading, indicating that more BiVO<sub>4</sub> particles are deposited on the surface of LaVO<sub>4</sub>. The diffraction peaks of BiVO<sub>4</sub> are denoted with asterisk symbols. The diffraction peaks of two distinct phases of LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> are clearly observed in the XRD pattern of LV/BV50 as shown in Fig. 1(e). The XRD patterns of monoclinic BiVO<sub>4</sub> prepared by precipitation method are also presented for comparison in Fig. 1(g). Moreover, the diffraction peak

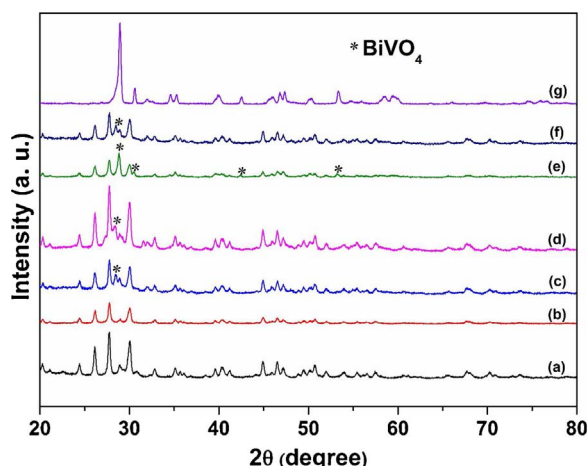


Fig. 1. Powder X-ray diffraction patterns of (a) LaVO<sub>4</sub>, (b) LV/BV10, (c) LV/BV20, (d) LV/BV30, (e) LV/BV50, (f) Ag/LV/BV20 and (g) BiVO<sub>4</sub>.

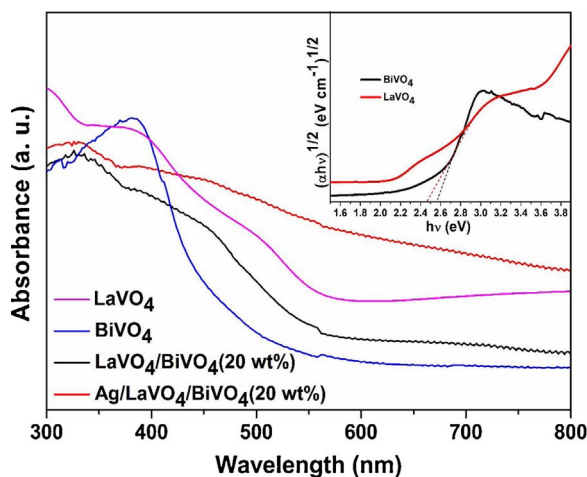


Fig. 2. UV-vis diffuse reflectance spectra of photocatalysts and inset shows Kubelka-Munk-transformed DRS of LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub>.

positions of LaVO<sub>4</sub> do not shift, which suggests BiVO<sub>4</sub> is merely deposited on the surface of LaVO<sub>4</sub> instead of covalently merging into the crystal lattice. In addition, the XRD pattern of Ag/LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> (20 wt%) (Fig. 1(f)) is similar to that of LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> (20 wt%) (Fig. 2(c)), and no distinguishable peaks corresponding to metallic Ag are observed, because the amount of Ag loading in the composite is possibly below the detection limit of XRD. The presence of metallic Ag on the surface of LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> (20 wt%) composite has been verified in the later section. Therefore, up to now, the above analyses endorse the coexistence of both LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> in the composite photocatalysts.

The photoresponse of a semiconductor, which is inextricably linked to its electronic structure, is considered as the key factor in determining its photocatalytic activity. The optical property of LaVO<sub>4</sub>, BiVO<sub>4</sub>, LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> (20 wt%) and Ag/LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> (20 wt%) was investigated using UV-vis diffuse reflectance spectra ranging from ultraviolet to visible region, as shown in Fig. 2. It is clearly seen in Fig. 2 that all the samples show strong absorbance in the visible region. Particularly, the absorption curve of the Ag/LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> (20 wt%) shows distinctly enhanced visible-light absorption compared to other catalysts. The monoclinic phases of both LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> can be regarded as indirect band gap semiconductors [30,31] and their band gap energies can be determined using the plot of the Kubelka-Munk function  $(\alpha h\nu)^{1/2}$  versus incident light energy  $(h\nu)$ , where  $\alpha$  is absorption co-efficient,  $h$  is Planck constant and  $\nu$  is frequency of light [32]. The extrapolated linear line of the curve that meets at x-axis intercept gives

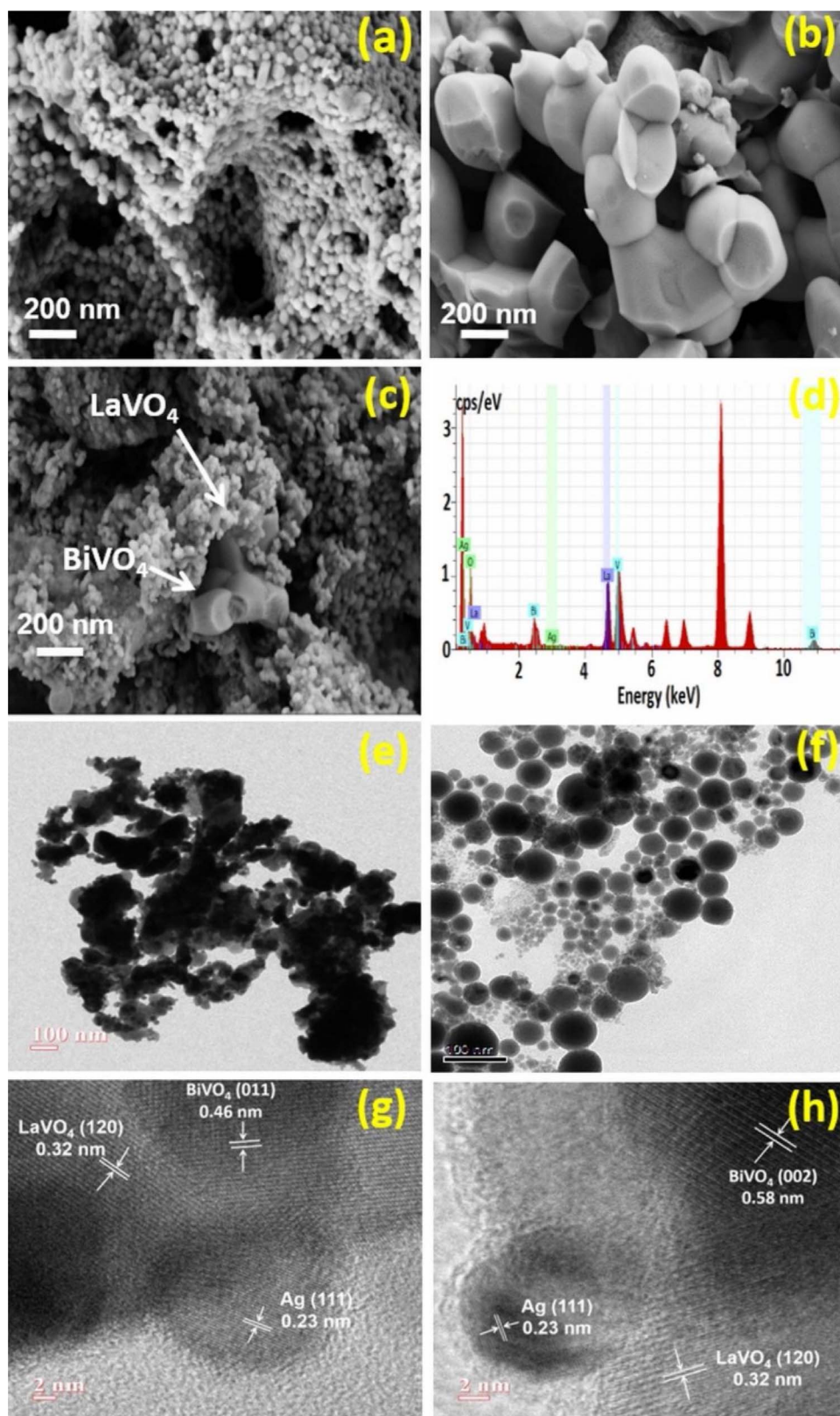


Fig. 3. SEM images of (a)  $\text{LaVO}_4$ , (b)  $\text{BiVO}_4$ , (c)  $\text{LV/BV20}$ , (d) EDS profile of  $\text{Ag/LV/BV20}$ , bright field TEM images of (e)  $\text{Ag/LV/BV20}$  and (f)  $\text{LaVO}_4$ , HR-TEM images (g, h) of  $\text{Ag/LV/BV20}$ .

band gap energy of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  as shown in the inset of Fig. 2. By applying this equation, the band gap of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  is estimated to be 2.48 eV and 2.56 eV, respectively.

The band gap of the  $\text{LaVO}_4$  synthesized in this work is found to be slightly higher ( $\sim 0.4$  eV) compared to that of the bulk  $\text{LaVO}_4$ , [15,18,33] which can be ascribed to the quantum confinement effect in

the nanocrystalline  $\text{LaVO}_4$ . In general, higher band gap energy for at least one counterpart of the composite could be beneficial for improving the redox potential of photocatalytic reaction, importantly for water splitting. In the present investigation, both  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  have narrow band gaps with no significant difference, suggesting that band alignment of the catalysts is the decisive factor in designing Z-

scheme photocatalysts rather than disparity in the band gap energies.

To determine the morphology and microstructure of the composite and its counterparts, scanning electron microscopy (SEM) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images were recorded at room temperature as shown in Fig. 3.  $\text{LaVO}_4$  exhibits network of nanoparticle assemblages, as shown in Fig. 3(a) and the TEM image (Fig. 3(f)) also confirms that spherical nanoparticles of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  are dense and non uniform ranging in size from 5 to 80 nm. The morphology of pure  $\text{BiVO}_4$  displays irregular shaped crystallites, as shown in Fig. 3(b). These crystallites possess well exposed smooth surfaces and sharp edges which play considerable role in charge carrier migration. In the SEM image of LV/BV20 (Fig. 3(c)), both  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  particles are easily distinguishable and  $\text{LaVO}_4$  particles are well anchored with the surface of  $\text{BiVO}_4$ . Therefore, the formation of  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  composite is obviously discernible that is beneficial to the efficient transport of charge carriers in comparison to pure  $\text{LaVO}_4$ .

The TEM image of Ag/LV/BV20 in Fig. 3(e) displays the aggregation of large  $\text{BiVO}_4$  particles with smaller  $\text{LaVO}_4$  particles and metallic Ag particles with size of about 10 nm are deposited on the surface of composite. Moreover, metallic Ag particles are formed on the junction of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  evidenced by the three sets of lattice fringes as shown in the HRTEM images (Fig. 3(g, h)) of Ag/LV/BV20 composite photocatalyst. The d-spacings of  $\text{BiVO}_4$ ,  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and Ag in Ag/LV/BV20 were determined as 0.46/0.58 nm, 0.32 nm and 0.23 nm from the lattice fringes of (011)/(002), (120) and (111) planes corresponding to monoclinic  $\text{BiVO}_4$ ,  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and cubic Ag, respectively. Noticeably, the connections among these components are intimate and Ag particles mostly exist at the interface of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$ . The latter is probably due to the photogenerated electron diffusion at the interface of  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  during the photodeposition of Ag [34]. Therefore, Ag can act as an electron mediator between  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  in the composite photocatalyst. In addition, TEM equipped energy dispersive spectrum (EDS) in Fig. 3(d) verifies that Ag, La, Bi, V and O are the only elements detected in the Ag/LV/BV20 photocatalyst. The measured BET surface areas of  $\text{LaVO}_4$ ,  $\text{BiVO}_4$ , LV/BV20 and Ag/LV/BV20 are found to be 3.2, 2.3, 4.7 and 4.6  $\text{m}^2/\text{g}$ , respectively. The BET surface areas exhibited little difference between pure  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and Ag/LV/BV20, which indicates that the photocatalytic performance of catalysts cannot be judged by the differences in their surface areas in the present investigation. Therefore, the BET experiments ruled out the contribution of surface area in improving the photocatalytic activity of the composite.

The X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) survey spectrum of Ag/LV/BV20 (Fig. 4(a)) exhibits the presence of Ag, La, Bi, V, O and C elements, indicating its hybrid composition. Among them, the presence of the C element may be due to the hydrocarbon contaminants that commonly exist for XPS. The chemical states of all elements of Ag/LV/BV20 sample were analyzed by their high-resolution XPS spectra, as shown in Fig. 4(b–f). Two signals at 834.9 eV and 851.7 eV in Fig. 4(c) are ascribed to  $\text{La } 3d_{5/2}$  and  $\text{La } 3d_{3/2}$ , respectively, which can be assigned to  $\text{La}^{3+}$  ion of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  [35]. The binding energies of  $\text{Bi } 4f_{7/2}$  and  $\text{Bi } 4f_{5/2}$  are 159.08 eV and 164.2 eV, respectively (Fig. 4(d)), confirming that bismuth is in the +3 valence state in  $\text{BiVO}_4$  lattice [36]. The observed O 1s peaks at 530.1 eV and 531.9 eV in Fig. 4(f) are in agreement with the lattice oxygen and oxygen species of hydroxyl groups adsorbed on the surface, respectively [37]. The binding energies of V  $2p_{3/2}$  and V  $2p_{1/2}$  are observed at 517.0 eV and 524.2 eV (Fig. 4(e)), respectively, which can be attributed to  $\text{V}^{5+}$  ions of  $\text{VO}_4^{3-}$  moieties in the  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  samples [14,36]. These results confirmed the coexistence of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  in Ag/LV/BV20 sample, which is consistent with the XRD analysis. Moreover, Ag 3d spectrum clearly indicates two characteristic peaks at 368.1 eV and 374.1 eV as shown in Fig. 4(b), corroborating the presence of metallic Ag on the surface of the LV/BV20 sample [38]. Therefore, it can be inferred that the Ag particles have been formed on the surface of the LV/BV20 photocatalyst during the photoreduction process and which can act as electron mediator in the composite photocatalyst.

To further elucidate the interactions between  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  in Ag/LV/BV20, the high-resolution XPS spectra of La 3d of pristine  $\text{LaVO}_4$ , Bi 4f of pure  $\text{BiVO}_4$  and Ag/LV/BV20 are shown in Fig. 4(g, h). The binding energies of Bi  $4f_{7/2}$  and Bi  $4f_{5/2}$  of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  are shifted by 0.4 eV with respect to Ag/LV/BV20. Similarly, the binding energies of the La  $3d_{5/2}$  and La  $3d_{3/2}$  of pure  $\text{LaVO}_4$  are shifted by 0.45 eV compared to Ag/LV/BV20. This shift in binding energies is a consequence of the formation of an interface between  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$ , which causes disturbance in the electron density and the local environment around the elements. Based on these XPS results, it is believed that  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  interact electronically through the interface and metallic Ag particles have been successfully loaded on the surface of LV/BV20 composite, to fabricate a Z-scheme Ag/LV/BV20 photocatalytic system.

### 3.2. Photocatalytic hydrogen evolution

The evaluation of photocatalytic performances for  $\text{H}_2$  evolution of  $\text{LaVO}_4$ , Ag/ $\text{LaVO}_4$ ,  $\text{BiVO}_4$  and  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  composites are shown in Fig. 5. Pristine  $\text{BiVO}_4$  did not produce any hydrogen due to the more positive conduction band potential. However, when  $\text{BiVO}_4$  is coupled with  $\text{LaVO}_4$ , enhanced photocatalytic efficiency of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  was observed for  $\text{H}_2$  evolution. All the composite photocatalysts and pristine  $\text{LaVO}_4$  exhibit significant photocatalytic activities of  $\text{H}_2$  evolution without any cocatalyst, unveiling the inherent photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  generation property of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  for the first time. After 3 h of irradiation, the corresponding  $\text{H}_2$  evolution for  $\text{LaVO}_4$  is 24  $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1}$ , which is relatively low because of the easy annihilation of photoexcited electron-hole pairs. In addition, Ag (10 wt%) deposited  $\text{LaVO}_4$  (Ag/ $\text{LaVO}_4$ ) shows slightly higher photocatalytic activity than pure  $\text{LaVO}_4$ . However, Ag/ $\text{LaVO}_4$  shows lower photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  evolution than the  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  composites, which imply that combining  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  is an efficient route to improve the photocatalytic activity of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  than mere loading of Ag on  $\text{LaVO}_4$ . With the increased loading of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  to 20 wt% (LV/BV20), the  $\text{H}_2$  evolution rate is enhanced to 45.5  $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1}$ , revealing the synergism between  $\text{BiVO}_4$  and  $\text{LaVO}_4$ .

However, the  $\text{H}_2$  evolution for  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  decreased gradually with the further increase in the amount of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  loading. The reason for reduction of activity may be envisaged as the excess of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  on the surface of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  may mask the active sites for hydrogen generation. Through the sequential increase in loading of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  components, it has been found that the 20 wt% of  $\text{BiVO}_4$  onto  $\text{LaVO}_4$  (LV/BV20) as optimal loading since it exhibited the higher photocatalytic activity. In addition, the  $\text{H}_2$  evolution rate of LV/BV20 is noticeably enhanced by Ag loading. When the loading of Ag is 10 wt% with respect to LV/BV20, the  $\text{H}_2$  evolution rate reached a maximum of 55.8  $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1}$  and that sample is denoted as Ag/LV/BV20. This may signify that Ag could play as a crucial charge carrier bridge between  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  that results in enhancement of charge separation efficiency for  $\text{LaVO}_4$ . The activity trend (Fig. 6) indicates that after a threshold Ag loading (10 wt%), the  $\text{H}_2$  evolution rate declines, which may be credited to the overloading of Ag particles. The Ag in the over loaded samples renders the parasitic absorption which block the transition of photons in the LV/BV20 thereby generation of photogenerated charge carriers, finally could account for decreased activity [6]. In addition, a control experiment with Ag (10 wt%) deposited physically ground mixture of  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  (20 wt%) showed a very low yield of hydrogen than Ag/LV/BV20 (as shown in Fig. 6(e)). It clearly demonstrates that the firm contact formed between the counterparts of the composite played key role in enhancing the hydrogen evolution rate of Ag/LV/BV20.

Moreover, the BET surface areas exhibited diminutive difference among  $\text{LaVO}_4$ ,  $\text{BiVO}_4$ , LV/BV20 and Ag/LV/BV20, which indicates that the specific surface areas had little effect on the photocatalytic performance of the samples. Therefore, all the above observations evince that the charge carrier dynamics occurring at the interface between the  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  may be decisive for the photocatalytic  $\text{H}_2$  production. At this stage, it was thought worthwhile to ensure the broader utility of

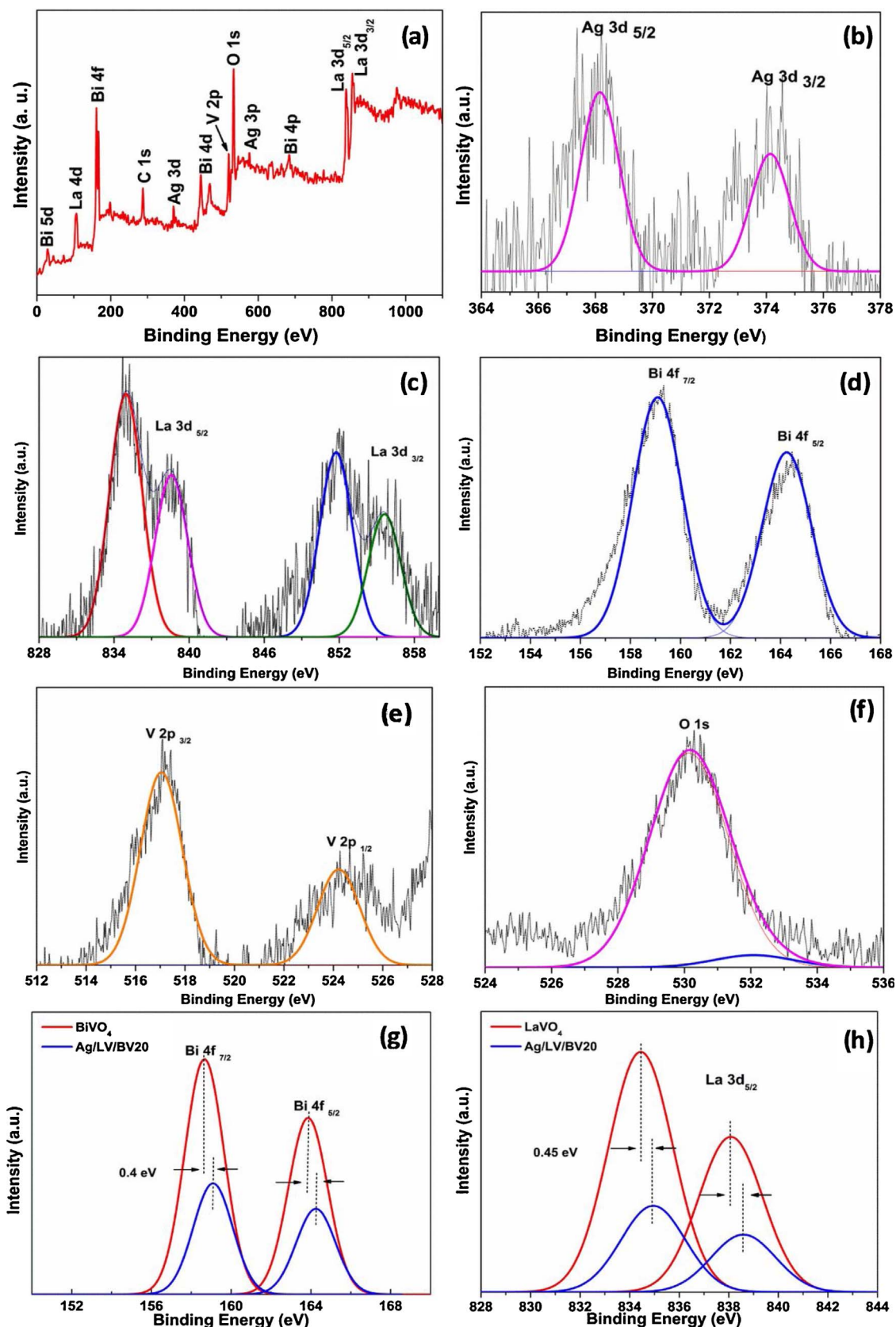


Fig. 4. XPS spectra of sample Ag/LV/BV20: (a) the survey spectrum, (b) Ag 3d, (c) La 3d, (d) Bi 4f, (e) V 2p, (f) O 1s, (g) comparison of Bi 4f of pure BiVO<sub>4</sub> and Ag/LV/BV20 (h) comparison of La 3d of pure LaVO<sub>4</sub> and Ag/LV/BV20.

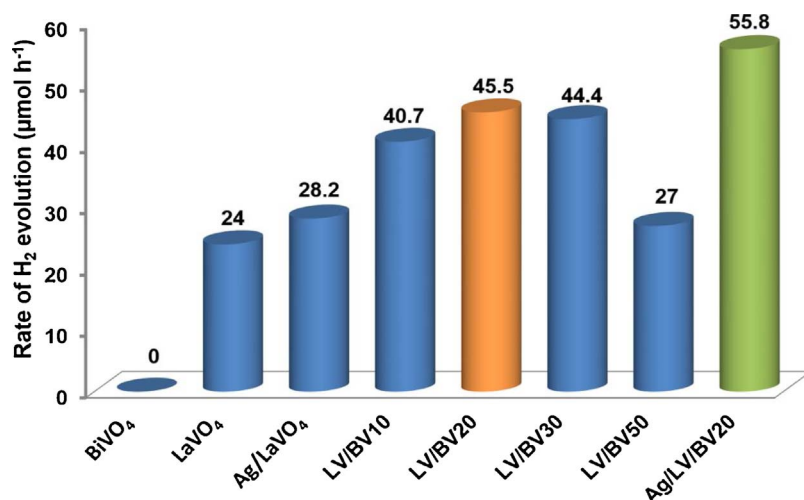


Fig. 5. Rate of H<sub>2</sub> evolution for various photocatalysts during 3 h of irradiation.

the current materials and their activities were compared with the results of redox mediator free Z-scheme photocatalyst systems reported in literature as shown in Table 1. Most of the reported Z-scheme photocatalysts used very expensive Pt as cocatalyst or Au as electron mediator or both, which may hinder their use for practical applications.

Based on the above outcomes, LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> composite photocatalysts possessed implicitly a higher photocatalytic hydrogen evolution rate than its individual counterparts. For the sake of clarifying the detailed root causes of the improved performance of the composite photocatalyst, knowledge of relative band edge positions of the catalysts is crucial. The migration pathway of the photogenerated charge carriers across the interface of LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> composite depends on the band edge position of the two semiconductors. The valence band (VB) and the conduction band (CB) of the both catalysts in LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> composite were calculated empirically using Mulliken absolute electronegativity ( $\chi$ ) and the band gap of a semiconductor obtained using DRS [60,61]. The  $\chi$  value for LaVO<sub>4</sub> is 5.69 and the  $E_{CB}$  and  $E_{VB}$  of LaVO<sub>4</sub> are calculated to be  $-0.05$  and  $2.43$  eV, respectively. The CB position of LaVO<sub>4</sub> is found to be negative than the hydrogen electrode potential ( $0$  eV Vs NHE;  $H^+/H_2$ ) to achieve the prerequisite of the hydrogen evolution and it is in agreement with the previous report [18]. The same principle can be applied to calculate the band edge positions of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and the obtained  $E_{CB}$  and  $E_{VB}$  are  $0.23$  and  $2.79$  eV, respectively, which clearly supports the thermodynamic inability of BiVO<sub>4</sub> to produce hydrogen.

In addition, Mott-Schottky method was also used to determine the CB and VB of both LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub>, which has been considered as reliable technique for determination of electronic potentials of semiconductors [62,63]. The flatband potential of a semiconductor can be obtained from the x-intercept of the linear region of the Mott-Schottky

plots as shown in Fig. 7. The flatband potentials of LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> were approximately calculated as  $-0.28$  and  $-0.06$  V (vs. SCE), respectively. The obtained flatband potentials can be converted to the normal hydrogen electrode (NHE) scale via the Nernst equation (Eq. (1)):

$$E(\text{NHE}) = E(\text{SCE}) + 0.24 \quad (1)$$

The calculated  $E_{CB}$  of LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> were  $-0.04$  eV and  $0.18$  eV, respectively. The  $E_{VB}$  of LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> were calculated using their band gap energies as shown in Eq. (2) and  $E_{VB}$  of LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> were  $2.44$  and  $2.74$  eV, respectively.

$$E_g = E_{VB} - E_{CB} \quad (2)$$

The band edge potentials of LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> obtained from Mott-Schottky plots are consistent with the values calculated from Mulliken absolute electronegativity ( $\chi$ ) and the band gap. Therefore, these results strongly conclude that CB bottom of LaVO<sub>4</sub> was higher than that of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, whereas VB top of BiVO<sub>4</sub> was lower than that of LaVO<sub>4</sub>.

Based on the band alignments of LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub>, Scheme 1 plots the two kinds of possible electron-hole transfer mechanisms in LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> composite: (i) customary heterojunction-type and (ii) direct Z-scheme type. In both cases, two semiconductors are activated simultaneously by irradiation. If the charge carrier migration in LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> occurs through a conventional heterojunction mechanism, the photoinduced electrons in CB of LaVO<sub>4</sub> can transport to the CB of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, whereas the photoinduced holes in the VB of BiVO<sub>4</sub> move to the VB of LaVO<sub>4</sub> as shown in Scheme 1(a). Because of the positive  $E_{CB}$  of BiVO<sub>4</sub>, the photoinduced electrons accumulated in the CB of BiVO<sub>4</sub> cannot produce hydrogen. However, the results of present

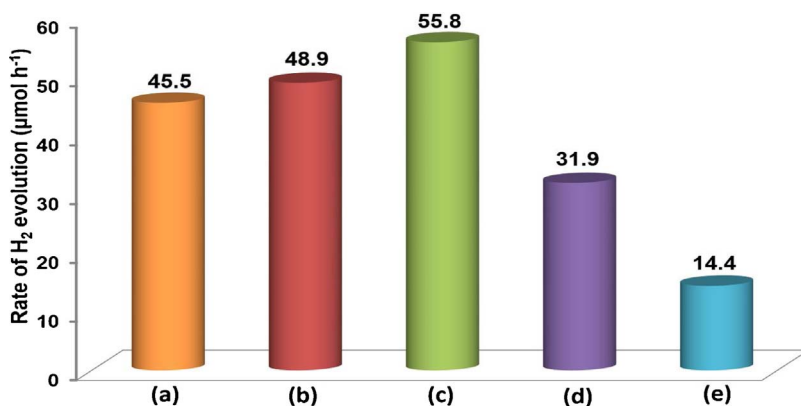
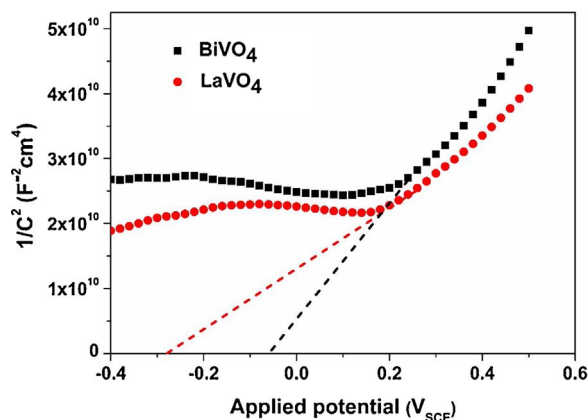


Fig. 6. Rate of H<sub>2</sub> evolution for different loadings of Ag on LV/BV20; (a) LV/BV20, (b) Ag(5 wt%)/LV/BV20, (c) Ag(10 wt%)/LV/BV20, (d) Ag(15 wt%)/LV/BV20, (e) Ag(10 wt%) on physical mixture of LV/BV20.

**Table 1**

Redox mediator free Z-scheme photocatalysts for hydrogen evolution reported in the literature. (PS – Photosystem, Cocat – Cocatalyst).

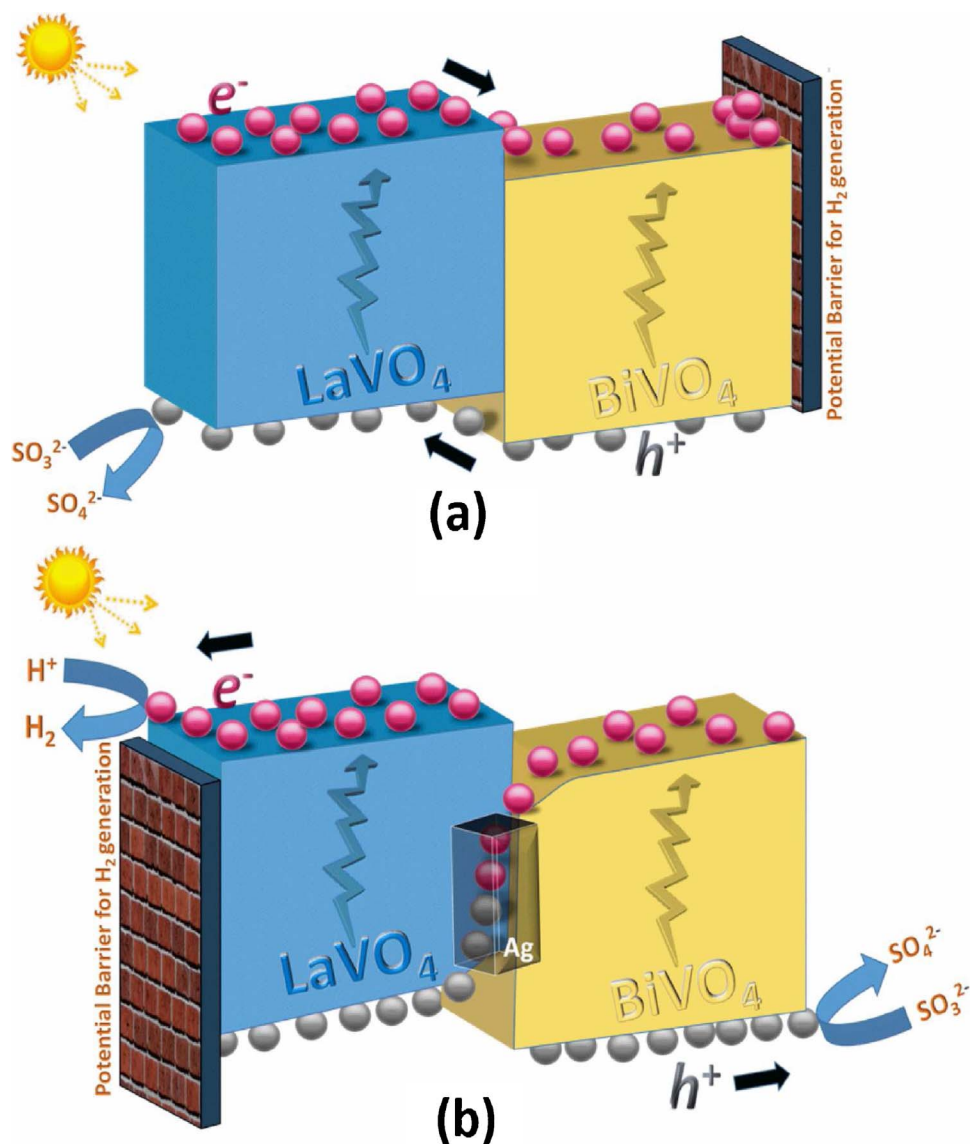
S. No	PS-I	PS-II	Cocat.	Electron mediator	Light source	Catalyst loading/Reactant solution	Application	Activity ( $\mu\text{mol h}^{-1}$ )	Refs.
1.	TiO <sub>2</sub>	CdS	Pt	Au	500 W Xe lamp (300 < $\lambda$ < 400)	0.02 g/20 mL water	H <sub>2</sub> production	0.01	[13]
2.	TiO <sub>1.96</sub> C <sub>0.04</sub>	CdS	Pt	Au	Xe arc lamp (> 420)	0.15 g/150 mL Na <sub>2</sub> S (0.05 M) + Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>3</sub> (0.1 M)	H <sub>2</sub> production	433.2	[39]
3.	WO <sub>3</sub>	PbBi <sub>2</sub> Nb <sub>1.9</sub> Ti <sub>0.1</sub> O <sub>9</sub>	–	W	450 W Xe arc lamp (> 420)	0.3 g/170 mL water + 30 mL CH <sub>3</sub> OH	H <sub>2</sub> production	14.7	[40]
4.	BiVO <sub>4</sub>	SrTiO <sub>3</sub> :Rh	Ru	RGO	300 W Xe lamp (> 420)	0.03 g/120 mL H <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub> (pH 3.5)	water splitting	H <sub>2</sub> : 11 O <sub>2</sub> : 5.5	[41]
5.	TiO <sub>2</sub>	CdS	–	Au	750 W Xe-illuminator (full)	0.05 g/50 mL Na <sub>2</sub> S (0.25 M) + Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>3</sub> (0.35 M)	H <sub>2</sub> production	3.2	[42]
6.	ZnO	CdS	–	Au	300 W Xe lamp (full)	0.1 g/270 mL Na <sub>2</sub> S (0.1 M) + Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>3</sub> (0.1 M)	H <sub>2</sub> production	60.8	[43]
7.	TiO <sub>2</sub>	P <sub>2</sub> W <sub>17</sub>	–	Pt	250 W high pressure Hg lamp (> 365)	0.05 g/8 mL glycerol + 72 mL water	H <sub>2</sub> production	19.6	[44]
8.	ZnO	CdS	Pt	Cd	300 W Xe lamp (full)	0.1 g/300 mL Na <sub>2</sub> S (0.1 M) + Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>3</sub> (0.1 M)	H <sub>2</sub> production	1920	[45]
9.	BiVO <sub>4</sub>	SrTiO <sub>3</sub> :Rh	Ru	–	300 W Xe arc lamp (> 420)	0.1 g/120 mL water (H <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub> , pH 3.5)	water splitting	H <sub>2</sub> : 29 O <sub>2</sub> : 14	[46]
10.	Ir/CoO <sub>x</sub> /Ta <sub>3</sub> N <sub>5</sub>	SrTiO <sub>3</sub> :Rh	Ru	Ir	300 W Xe lamp (> 420)	0.05 g/250 mL water (H <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub> , pH 4.9)	water splitting	H <sub>2</sub> : 23 O <sub>2</sub> : 12	[47]
11.	ZnO	CdS	Pt	–	300 W Xe lamp (full)	0.2 g/300 mL Na <sub>2</sub> S (0.1 M) + Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>3</sub> (0.1 M)	H <sub>2</sub> production	774	[48]
12.	g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	WO <sub>3</sub>	Pt	–	300 W Xe lamp (> 420)	0.04 g/40 mL 10 vol% triethanolamine	H <sub>2</sub> production	4.4	[49]
13.	ZnRh <sub>2</sub> O <sub>4</sub>	Ag <sub>1-x</sub> SbO <sub>3-y</sub>	–	Ag	300 W Xe lamp (> 460)	0.06 g/12 mL water	water splitting	H <sub>2</sub> : 0.38 O <sub>2</sub> : 0.2	[50]
14.	CuGaS <sub>2</sub>	TiO <sub>2</sub>	Pt	RGO	300 W Xe lamp (full)	0.05 g/120 mL water	water splitting	H <sub>2</sub> : 19.8 O <sub>2</sub> : 10.3	[51]
15.	TiO <sub>2</sub>	MoO <sub>3</sub>	Pt	–	75 W Xe lamp (full)	0.1 g/300 mL methanol	H <sub>2</sub> production	16	[52]
16.	ZnIn <sub>2</sub> S <sub>4</sub>	g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	–	Nano C	12 W UV-LED(= 420)	0.05 g/80 mL 0.5 M Na <sub>2</sub> S + 0.5 M Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>3</sub>	H <sub>2</sub> production	50.3	[53]
17.	CoTiO <sub>3</sub>	g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	Pt	–	300 W Xe lamp (full)	0.02 g/10 vol% ethanol	H <sub>2</sub> production	17.1	[54]
18.	Cu <sub>2</sub> O	g-C <sub>3</sub> N <sub>4</sub>	–	Pd	300 W Xe lamp (400 < $\lambda$ < 780)	0.015 g/20 mL 10 vol% triethanolamine	H <sub>2</sub> production	0.48	[55]
19.	CdS	WO <sub>3</sub>	Pt	–	500 W Xe lamp(> 400)	0.05 g/lactic acid	H <sub>2</sub> production	145	[56]
20.	LaMg <sub>1/3</sub> Ta <sub>2/3</sub> O <sub>2</sub> N	BiVO <sub>4</sub> :Mo	RhCrO <sub>x</sub>	Au	300 W Xe lamp(> 400)	0.02 g/40 mL 20% methanol, 40 mL 20 mM AgNO <sub>3</sub>	water splitting	H <sub>2</sub> : 1.2 O <sub>2</sub> : 0.6	[57]
21.	RGO	Ag <sub>3</sub> PO <sub>4</sub>	–	–	300 W Xe lamp(> 400)	0.05 g/50 mL 10% methanol	H <sub>2</sub> production	184	[58]
22.	Si	MgTiO <sub>3</sub>	–	–	300 W Xe lamp(> 420)	0.02 g/100 mL of pure water	H <sub>2</sub> production	3.18	[59]
23.	LaVO <sub>4</sub>	BiVO <sub>4</sub>	–	–	400 W Metal halide lamp	0.015 g/150 mL 0.5 M Na <sub>2</sub> S + 0.5 M Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>3</sub>	H <sub>2</sub> production	45.5	Present work
24.	LaVO <sub>4</sub>	BiVO <sub>4</sub>	–	Ag	400 W Metal halide lamp	0.015 g/150 mL 0.5 M Na <sub>2</sub> S + 0.5 M Na <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>3</sub>	H <sub>2</sub> production	55.8	Present work

**Fig. 7.** Mott-Schottky plots collected for LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> at a frequency of 1 kHz in the dark. (0.1 M Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>, vs SCE).

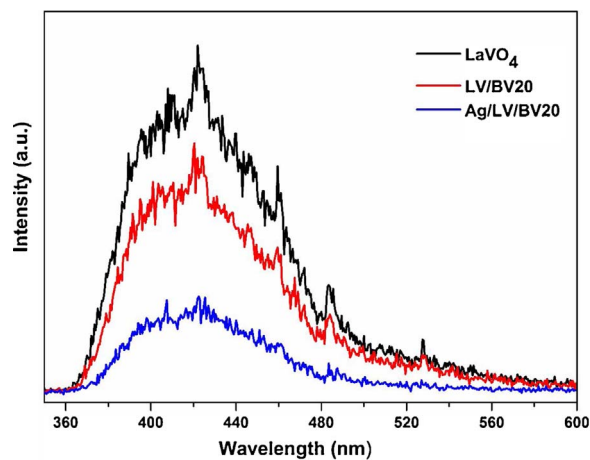
photocatalytic H<sub>2</sub> production experiments conflict the conventional heterojunction mechanism. Therefore, photocatalytic hydrogen can be generated in the LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> composite only when the electrons in the CB of BiVO<sub>4</sub> are ready or forced to migrate to the VB of LaVO<sub>4</sub> by the Z-scheme mechanism. In this process, weak reductive electrons in

CB of BiVO<sub>4</sub> are recombined with the weak oxidative holes in VB of LaVO<sub>4</sub>. Thus, the photogenerated electrons with strong reducibility are accumulated on the conduction band of LaVO<sub>4</sub>, which have the energy to stride over the potential barrier and reduce H<sup>+</sup> into H<sub>2</sub> gas. Meanwhile the photogenerated holes with strong oxidizability are accumulated on the valence band of BiVO<sub>4</sub> and they are funneled to be consumed by the sacrificial reagent. Therefore, it can be impeccably confirmed that the proposed mechanism of direct Z-scheme is reasonable for LaVO<sub>4</sub>/BiVO<sub>4</sub> composite.

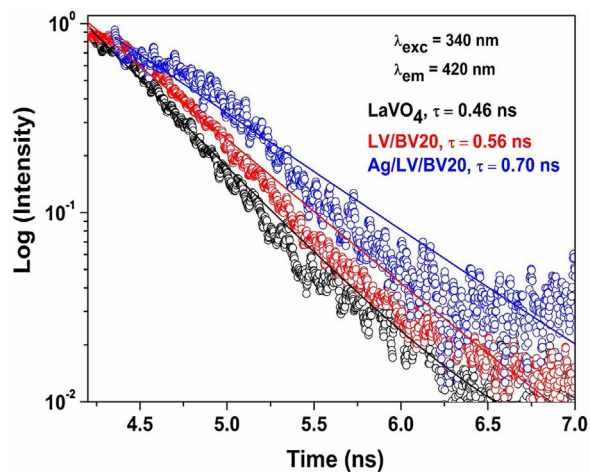
In addition, the interfacial charge transfer efficiency of LV/BV20 composite was further improved by loading Ag as a charge transmission bridge. During the internal charge transmission, the electrons in the CB of BiVO<sub>4</sub> move to metallic Ag due to the E<sub>CB</sub> of BiVO<sub>4</sub> is quite negative than the Fermi level of metallic Ag (i.e., 0.8 eV) [64]. Concurrently, the holes in the VB of LaVO<sub>4</sub> shift to metallic Ag owing to the E<sub>VB</sub> of LaVO<sub>4</sub> is far positive than the Fermi level of metallic Ag and mingle with electrons here as shown in Scheme 1(b). Therefore, the intimate contact between LaVO<sub>4</sub> and BiVO<sub>4</sub> with the nested band edge positions and Ag as the charge transmission bridge act in concert to promote more reductive electrons for H<sub>2</sub> evolution, which is presumed to be the origin of the observed superior photocatalytic activity of Ag/LV/BV20. It is reported in the literature that Z-scheme charge transfer mechanism can be verified by the overall water splitting in presence of composite photocatalyst and in the absence of electron acceptor and donor [65].



**Scheme 1.** Illustration showing separation of photogenerated charge carriers in (a) typical heterojunction mechanism, (b) direct Z-scheme mechanism with Ag as electron mediator.



**Fig. 8.** Room-temperature photoluminescence (PL) emission spectra of  $\text{LaVO}_4$ ,  $\text{LV/BV20}$  and  $\text{Ag/LV/BV20}$  composites excited at 340 nm.



**Fig. 9.** PL decay measurements of photocatalysts.  $\tau$  is the lifetime obtained by fitting to a single exponential decay function.

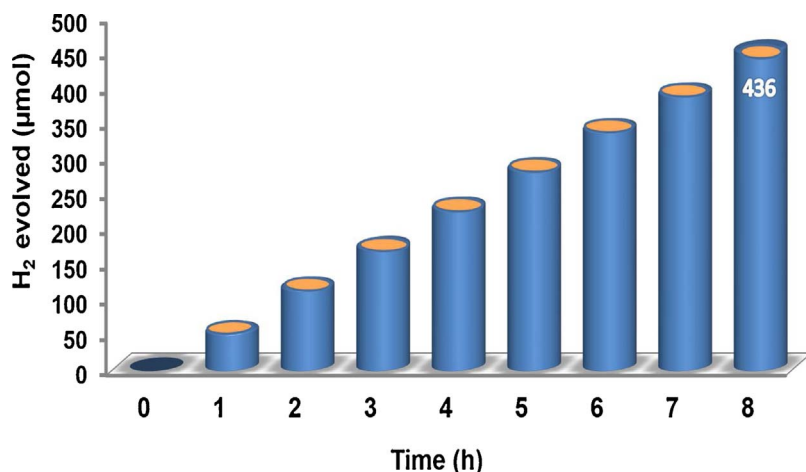


Fig. 10. Hydrogen generation over Ag/LV/BV20 with the irradiation time of 8 h.

The evaluation of overall water splitting using Ag/LV/BV20 photocatalyst was carried out with pure water under similar experimental conditions without adding any sacrificial reagent. The rates of hydrogen and oxygen evolution are observed to be  $1.17 \mu\text{mol h}^{-1}$  and  $0.52 \mu\text{mol h}^{-1}$ , respectively. Therefore, the simultaneous evolution of hydrogen and oxygen in aqueous reactant solution with Ag/LV/BV20 photocatalyst is consistent with the Z-scheme charge transfer mechanism. The very low yield of hydrogen and oxygen gases is obvious in overall water splitting because it is an uphill reaction associated with the rapid recombination of photogenerated electrons – holes and large driving force for the backward reaction producing  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  [66]. To meet the objective of this work (i.e., generation of hydrogen fuel), photocatalytic hydrogen evolution was studied with  $\text{Na}_2\text{S}$  and  $\text{Na}_2\text{SO}_3$  as hole scavengers and the rate of hydrogen evolution is almost 50 times more than the rate of hydrogen evolution in overall water splitting.

To validate the efficient separation of charge carriers in Z-scheme  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  composite, photoluminescence (PL) spectra have been studied. PL spectroscopy is directly related to the dynamic behavior of photogenerated charge carriers, such as transfer, capture and separation, because PL signal is a result of recombination of free charge carriers [67,68]. There is a consensus regarding the correlation between PL emission intensity and photocatalytic performance, that the life time of photogenerated charge carriers is longer for weaker PL signal. Thus, charge carriers have a greater possibility to reach the surface of catalyst to initiate the redox reactions. Upon exciting at 340 nm, a broad emission peak of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  was detected around 420 nm, which indicates that the electrons and holes recombine rapidly in  $\text{LaVO}_4$ . The intensity of the luminous peak of LV/BV20 is weaker than that of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  as shown in Fig. 8, which conquers the recombination of the photogenerated electrons and holes to some extent. The intensity of the PL peak of Ag/LV/BV20 shows a further decay by comparing with that of the LV/BV20 composite. This indicates that the existence of Ag in this composite can effectively increase the lifetime of the photogenerated electrons that can participate in the reduction reaction instead of emissive recombination. This is in good agreement with the superior photocatalytic hydrogen evolution of Ag/LV/BV20.

To shed more light on the lifetime of the photogenerated electron-hole pair in the photocatalysts, the decay profiles of the emission were obtained using time-resolved fluorescence spectroscopy. In the fluorescence decay profiles (Fig. 9),  $\text{LaVO}_4$  showed relatively short life time of excited electrons which means the characteristic higher rate of recombination of electron-hole pairs. LV/BV20 exhibited a longer life time of excited electrons than  $\text{LaVO}_4$  suggesting that transfer of photoexcited electrons and holes between  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  must exist in a Z-scheme manner and that retards the annihilation of charge carriers. The lifetime of carriers in Ag/LV/BV20 is further prolonged which promotes Ag as an electron mediator on  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  composite and it

could also be concluded that photocatalytic results are in line with the lifetime measurements.

The Z-scheme Ag/LV/BV20 photocatalyst also showed stable  $\text{H}_2$  evolution behavior over a period of 8 h, as shown in Fig. 10. Moreover, the nearly linear increase in cumulative hydrogen evolution with the irradiation time was noticed and reached up to  $436 \mu\text{mol}$  in 8 h, which entails the sustainable photocatalytic hydrogen generation. The structural integrity of the photocatalyst is retained even after 8 h of photocatalytic run as evident from XRD patterns (not shown), implying the excellent phase stability. Hence, the Z-scheme Ag/LV/BV20 photocatalyst exhibits excellent  $\text{H}_2$  evolution activity with significant longevity.

#### 4. Conclusions

The present work investigated the ability of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  to evolve hydrogen for the first time in aqueous  $\text{Na}_2\text{S}$  and  $\text{Na}_2\text{SO}_3$  solution and the construction of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  based Z-scheme Ag/ $\text{LaVO}_4$ / $\text{BiVO}_4$  photocatalytic system without the use of cocatalysts and redox mediators. Ag loaded  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  (20 wt%) showed a higher rate of hydrogen evolution compared to Ag/ $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  (20 wt%), indicating the crucial role of Ag as electron mediator. The superior photocatalytic performance of Ag/ $\text{LaVO}_4/\text{BiVO}_4$  is mainly ascribed to the enhanced life span of charge carriers in a Z-scheme charge-transfer mechanism originating from the well-nested band positions of  $\text{LaVO}_4$  and  $\text{BiVO}_4$  despite their closer band gap energies. The Z-scheme charge-transfer mechanism and role of Ag as an electron mediator were further testified by photoluminescence and life time measurements. In summary, this contribution provides an avenue for designing novel and highly efficient Z-scheme photocatalysts, thus meeting the requirements of future energy driven technologies.

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